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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 000530

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA AND EUR/CE

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PARM SY IS AU

SUBJECT: ASAD DISCUSSES U.S. RELATIONS, MEPP AND WINS GOA
SUPPORT FOR SYRIAN-EU PARTNERSHIP DURING VIENNA VISIT

REF: VIENNA 503

Classified by: Economic-Political Counselor J. Dean Yap for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Syrian President al-Asad told GOA leaders during an April 27-28 visit to Vienna that he is optimistic about the new U.S. Administration, but maintained that President Obama has one year to turn around U.S.-Syrian relations. He said the new Israeli government must demonstrate a willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights in order to resume peace talks with Syria, and argued for U.S. and EU engagement with Hamas. Asad was evasive on human rights and said he would not approve a second visit by International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to the site of a suspected secret nuclear reactor. Austrian President Fischer said publicly during the visit that the EU should quickly sign the EU-Syria Association Agreement. Asad was accompanied by a large business delegation, but no specific agreements were announced or reported. End Summary.

Asad: USG Has One Year to Improve Relations

¶12. (C) Econ/Pol Couns and Polchief met April 30 with Ralph Scheide, MFA Middle East Director, to discuss the Asad visit. Scheide told us Asad emphasized with GOA leaders that he welcomed President Obama's new approach to foreign policy, particularly Middle East policy. Relations with the U.S. are a top priority for Syria. He would like to see the U.S. send an Ambassador to Damascus. Improved relations with the U.S. would pave the way for solving other problems, such as relations with Israel. At the same time, Asad indicated that he remains concerned that the U.S. may be interested in regime change in Syria. He said President Obama has one year to turn around the U.S.-Syria relationship (Note: an oddly passive formulation). If there were no substantive changes within a year, he thought the new U.S. Administration would be distracted by other issues.

Views on MEPP

¶13. (C) Asad said the new Israeli government must demonstrate its willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights, in the context of a broader agreement, in order for talks with Syria to resume. According to Scheide, Asad did not completely reject the need to address Israel's security concerns, but he insisted that withdrawal from the Golan must be addressed first. Asad averred that the previous Israeli government had accepted withdrawal in principle, but the new administration has not made a commitment. If talks with Israel resume, success will depend largely on Israel's willingness to accept the 1967 borders and remove settlements, he reportedly said.

¶14. (C) Asad argued that the U.S., EU and others should engage Hamas in order to advance Arab-Israeli peace. Including Hamas in the process does not mean strengthening their

position. The fact is that Hamas has influence, and its role will have to be addressed sooner or later. Scheide said Asad had averred that Hamas' calls for Israel's destruction were, "a thing of the past." At the same time, Asad said there was no point in trying to form a Palestinian unity government until after the upcoming elections in the Palestinian territories.

GOA Supports EU-Syria Agreement

¶ 15. (C) During the visit, Austrian President Fischer said publicly that the EU should move quickly to sign the EU-Syria Association Agreement. Scheide told us there is a split in the EU between member states, like Austria, that want to sign the Agreement now, and others that want to wait for further Syrian actions. The GOA believes Syria's cooperation with the Lebanon Tribunal is sufficient. E/P Couns noted that the demarcation of the Syria-Lebanon border/resolution of Shebaa Farms had also been raised by the EU as criteria for advancing the Agreement. Scheide said GOA leaders did not raise those issues with Asad.

Asad Dodges Human Rights Issues

¶ 16. (C) Scheide said GOA officials pressed Asad on the problems faced by the Kurdish minority in Syria, the death penalty, and human rights generally. Asad argued that public opinion did not support a loosening of restrictions on Kurdish cultural expression, or elimination of the death penalty, responses that GOA interlocutors considered "not

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very satisfying," Scheide said.

No Follow-up IAEA Visit

¶ 17. (C) Asad noted that Syria had permitted IAEA inspectors to visit a site suspected of being a secret nuclear reactor, and said he would not allow a follow-up visit.

GOA: Business Ties Will Advance Political Reform

¶ 18. (C) Scheide maintained that the business roundtable held during the visit was part of an effort by the GOA to encourage Syria to open up economically, as a means to promote political liberalization. By developing its international business ties, Syria would be expanding its contacts with the outside world, "and that must have political consequences," he said.

KILNER